



Unveiling Caste Discrimination in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*

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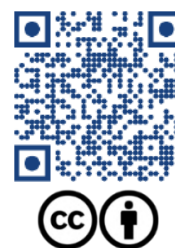
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Abstract— *Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography, Joothan, is a powerful narrative that exposes the deep scars of caste discrimination in Indian society. This article aims to unveil these scars by highlighting the theme of caste discrimination as portrayed in Joothan. This study argues that Joothan functions not only as a personal memoir but also as a socio-political testimony that challenges caste-based injustice and calls for social equality.*

Keywords— *Caste discrimination, public humiliation, poverty, social exclusion, marginalisation*



Introduction

Dalit literature is a significant Indian literary movement that exposes caste oppression and amplifies the voices of marginalized Dalit communities. Emerging prominently in the mid-20th century, it draws inspiration from social reformers like Phule, Ambedkar and Narayana Guru, as well as the Dalit Panthers movement. Spanning multiple Indian languages, it reflects both individual and collective experiences of injustice. Women Dalit writers such as Bama and Urmila Pawar further expanded the discourse by highlighting gendered oppression within caste.

Omprakash Valmiki, one of the foremost Dalit writers in Hindi, depicted the brutal realities of caste discrimination in works like *Joothan*, *Salaam* and *Guspethiye*. His autobiography *Joothan* remains a landmark text, chronicling the humiliation, poverty and systemic barriers faced by Dalits. This article explores Valmiki's narrative to understand how caste shape's identity and examines the broader implications of caste-based marginalization for social justice in contemporary India.

Caste Discrimination in *Joothan*:

Caste-based Discrimination highlights the gap between society's professed values of equality and the harsh

realities faced by marginalized groups. Omprakash Valmiki, in his autobiography *Joothan* chronicles his experiences as a Dalit, the endless struggles faced by him to attain the basic needs, and how he managed to become a respectful men accepted by society. He beautifully lays down the instances of hostility faced by him and his society due to discrimination.

Valmiki describes the domination of Tagas over Chuhra. Tagas, a society composed of high-class men and Chuhra were the untouchables. The author belonged to the marginalized community, Chuhra. Chuhra lived in a filthy, unhygienic, unsanitary and a contaminated area. On the other hand, Taga people lived cozily, getting their works done by the untouchables. Chuhra people were always committed to heavy labour in the field. The most tormenting part for Chuhra was not the labour but the attitude towards them by Tagas. Despite the heavy labour, they were always paid meagre amount or sometimes they work without pay. The upper-class people did all sort of things to tear apart the basic respect an individual holds. Chuhra were always summoned by their caste name. "If a person were older than we were, then he would call us OE, Chuhra" (*Joothan* 2). Name is considered as an identity of an individual, by summoning caste names their identity is lost. This

derogatory practice is picturized in Mulk Raj Anand's work *Untouchable*. The author beautifully presents the practice of upper class towards the downtrodden. "Posh Posh, the sweeper is coming." (Anand 45).

Omprakash Valmiki, in *Joothan* sheds light on how, in his time, even the educational institutions were bound by the inhumane practice of caste-based discrimination. The role of teachers has indeed transformed his life, but not on a positive side. Teachers during his period were just educated men with polluted minds, they never really grasped the essence of being civilized. Valmiki's guru humiliated him in all possible ways as he was not able to withstand a Dalit being educated. "Take him away from here. The Chuhra wants him educated. Go, go otherwise I'll have your bones broken" (*Joothan* 7).

Though the practice of the term untouchability is scorned nowadays, it was a normal and acceptable practice during the days of Omprakash Valmiki. It echoed through every nook and corner, be it an educational setting or a place of worship. The untouchables weren't allowed to drink water from the glass, that was kept as a common school utility. If they were thirsty, they would cup their hands and water will be poured into them from a height. (*Joothan* 19).

The concept of discriminating people based on their castes prevailed not only among the upper-class society, but by every individual whose houses were away from the fences of the untouchables. Omprakash faced all levels of discrimination imposed by every sect of people. During his school days, he approached a dhobi to iron his wrinkled clothes for school. But without any hesitation, the dhobi sternly denied his plea by declaring that his ironing tool was reserved only for the upper-class people, extending his service to Omprakash would cost him his daily livelihood. "We do not wash the clothes of Chuhra-chamaras. If we iron them, the Tagas won't get their clothes washed by us" (*Joothan* 21).

Suffering the torments and humiliation in silence, inflicted by Tagas was an everyday life of an outcast. Consistently, Chuhras were humiliated by part of tagas, headmaster of school, and even by common people who were just above their caste. There was no place for prestige or honour in their lives. The basic human rights were rightfully and most cruelly removed from the lives of the outcasts. They were merely used for jobs which were considered as spiteful and disgusting. The tagas insulted every single habit or custom followed by the Chuhras, insulting them for having pork as their staple food and so on. "Abey Chuhre ka, you eat pork" (*Joothan* 21). The laughter which continues this statement tears apart every speck of respect that an outcast carries.

The upper caste offers leftover foods to Chuhras when there is a chance of the food going to waste. The leftovers are a part and parcel of Chuhras's living. Their three meals of the day and sometimes even the best food offered to them were leftover rotis and rice. The Chuhra has to cup his hand while food was thrown into it from a height. Even this food is offered in a very small quantity, if anyone dares to ask for some more, they are publicly humiliated. "You are taking a basketful of Joothan and on top of that you want food for your children? Don't forget your place, Chuhri" (*Joothan* 13).

The most heart-breaking moment is when one realises that even the auspicious wedding ceremony in the Chuhra community is incomplete without an offering from the Tagas. The Tagas used to humiliate the groom party claiming it as the excessive desire of Chuhras to loot hefty amount from the Tagas. "The stomach of these Chuhras are never filled" (*Joothan* 37). Omprakash Valmiki has picturized the ill state of downtrodden people for whom even the food is seen as a luxury aspect rather than a necessity.

The term respect is tarnished completely and is totally discarded from the dictionary of Chuhras. The Tagas would utilise the labour of Chuhras for their convenience as if it is their birth right. The cruellest part is that they never get paid for these works and on top of that they were summoned by derogatory terms and titles. "Chuhra has to work without pay for the Tagas and whenever, one worked the employee's dead cattle was a part of his job" (*Joothan* 40). Valmiki depicted Chuhras in the novel *Joothan* as play toys to satisfy the pranks, bullies and torments of upper-class people which was evident through the incident where the police men used to arrest men from Chuhra Basti for no valuable reason.

Clothing is considered as a basic human need. The way one dresses has been categorized under the labels of caste, class and other barbaric customs. If a Dalit happens to wear a well stitched cloth, it is considered as an arrogant, prideful and most disrespectful attitude. One of the authors friends who belongs to Chuhra Basti has spent most of his childhood in town, as a result wears fancy clothes in Basti all the time. This irritated the upper-class people to the extreme. "Teachers and students disliked him for that. How dare he be superior to them? He was born in a Chuhra home" (*Joothan* 57).

The author and his friend are sent on some errands to a Taga's house. Unaware of their caste, the Taga has treated them with utmost hospitality. When the author is bombarded with a sudden question about the caste, the atmosphere has changed to a total blue. The laughter, warmth and formalities which they experienced a minute

before has crushed into uncompletable pieces. "Obscenities began to rain from the elder's mouth. His eyes were fierce and his skinny body was harbouring the devil" (*Joothan* 60).

The efforts of great figures like Ambedkar which included advocating for constitutional reforms to abolish untouchability, bore fruit over a long period. During this period, Dalits continued to live with endless taunts, meaningless insults and much more. This kind of life has made them numb to realise any kind of improvements or efforts. The Dalits were kept so out of the society that, they never knew about the value and importance of independence, vote of individual and the idea of democracy.

Most people did not understand the true meaning of democracy. They couldn't grasp the importance of stuffing a piece of paper in the ballot box. How innocent were those people, totally uncomprehending of the meaning or value of independence. (*Joothan* 86)

The idea of educating a Dalit is often seen as a foolish thing. Valmiki's father faced endless criticisms for his decision to give Valmiki a proper education. A marginalised individual is considered dumb or is perceived as only a loser. If one tries to outsmart the Tagas or tend to show improvement in his skills, the evil veil of caste strangles him like a cobra tied around neck. When Valmiki, questions his teacher about his doubt, his teacher bluntly turns him down by mocking his caste name. "Look at this Chuhra pretending to be a brahmin" (*Joothan* 71).

Even after gaining education, a job and fame as a writer, Valmiki could not escape caste discrimination. His own family abandoned him for refusing to adopt a new, caste-free surname. His friends never invited him to gatherings, though sanitation workers often did. "That's what will happen if you keep using Valmiki. You will be seen as a sanitation employee" (*Joothan* 150). Dalit writers, scholars, and activists all struggled with inner conflict and fear.

The writers, intellectuals and activists in the Dalit movement have to struggle constantly with their inner conflicts. There is so much fear lurking in the dark recesses of the heart that prevent us from leading normal lives. (*Joothan* 147)

Even though people were educated about the foolishness of caste, the old ideology was still deeply rooted in their behaviour.

In *Joothan*, Valmiki shows how people never let him forget his caste. "The surname of yours will drastically blemish your prestige one day" (*Joothan* 151). This proves

that caste was not only practiced but consumed in such large portions that it became part of people's very identity and behaviour. Caste follows a person from birth, even though no one chooses where they are born.

Conclusion

Caste discrimination in India, rooted in ancient texts like the Rigveda and Manu smriti, continues to marginalize Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs by restricting access to education, employment and social equality. This article examines Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, where his personal suffering represents the collective trauma of millions subjected to untouchability. Valmiki exposes the violence, humiliation and psychological harm caused by caste, challenging dominant Brahminical narratives that suppress Dalit voices. The autobiography reveals how caste dehumanizes individuals both materially and emotionally, with *Joothan* symbolizing the community's enforced degradation. The research highlights the urgency of addressing caste-based injustice through policy reform, inclusive education and social awareness. Valmiki's narrative translates Ambedkar's philosophy into lived experience, showing how caste persists despite modern progress.

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